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A

FAST SERMON

FOR

February the 27th, 1799;

FROM

ISAIAH, CHAP. X. VER. 5.

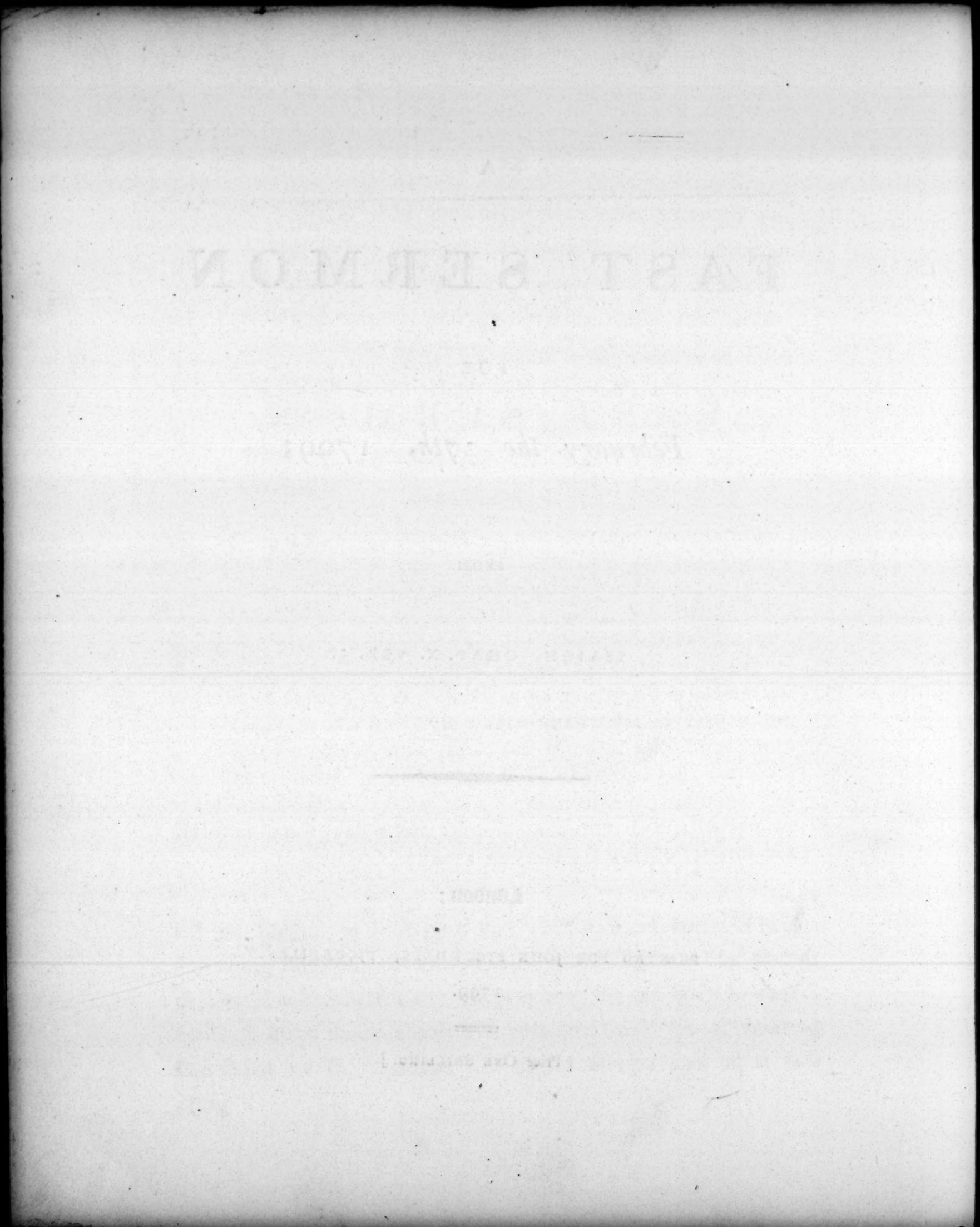
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A

FAST SERMON.

ISAIAH, CHAP. X. VER. 5.

HO TO THE ASSYRIAN, THE ROD OF MINE ANGER, AND THE STAFF IN WHOSE HAND IS THE INSTRUMENT OF MINE INDIGNATION. I WILL SEND HIM AGAINST AN HYPOCRITICAL NATION, AND AGAINST THE PEOPLE OF MY WRATH WILL I GIVE HIM A CHARGE, TO TAKE THE SPOIL, AND TO TAKE THE PREY, AND TO TREAD THEM DOWN LIKE THE MIRE OF THE STREETS. HOWEIT, HE MEANETH NOT SO; NEITHER DOES HIS HEART THINK SO; BUT IT IS IN HIS HEART TO DESTROY, AND CUT OFF NATIONS NOT A FEW. FOR HE SAITH, ARE NOT MY CHIEFS ALTOGETHER KINGS?

THE cruel scene which has been so long acting on the theatre of a neighbouring nation, by the especial grace and favour of God has not yet pervaded this happy island; and so peculiar is our situation, that it depends much upon ourselves that it be ever represented in this country. If we watch and pray,

pray, we may not probably enter upon the fiery trial; if we resolve to fast inwardly, and mortify our secret affections, we may still keep off the evil day, and repel the intruding enemy. When our Saviour first came into Galilee, preaching the Gospel of the kingdom of God, and saying, " The time is fulfilled, " and the kingdom of God is at hand: repent ye, and believe " the Gospel;" what, think ye, was the world more overwhelmed in wickedness than it is at this moment in a neighbouring kingdom and its dependencies? Were murder, sacrilege, and assassination, more frequent than now; were wrong and robbery more prevalent; was atheism more openly espoused; was liberty more daringly trampled on; was private property less respected, or oftener confiscated? Judea, a petty kingdom, was rent indeed into many parts by princes more engaged in the pride of reigning, than the cares of government. The sacred priesthood had forfeited its advantages of descent, and was subject to the avaricious policy of Pagan dictators. What remedy did the Saviour of the world bring with him for these evils? He brought repentance.

All the wars, and rumours of wars, and all the disorders of the world, are in reality owing to our sins, and produced by ambition, injustice, envy, and perfidy; nor can these deplorable effects be cut off but by a retrenchment of their causes; and our offences are the causes which can only be removed by correction and amendment.

This nevertheless is the only remedy we are willing to try; and rather than cast a thought on it, we are for recurring to every other feasible experiment. The first thing we do in order to liberate ourselves from the slavery of sin, is, to use the powers of nature, of art, and industry; the second, to call down, by prayer and supplication, the aid of supernatural agency. But this is not of the least avail without repentance, and that for two reasons; since to endeavour to correct without sorrow is to brave the anger of Heaven, and to amend without contrition is to aim at obtaining the mercy of God by fraud and seduction. We can never hope to prosper by either of these modes, for our sins prevent our prayers from succeeding. It was not, we are told, the sword of God alone, nor the sword of Gideon, that conquered the Midianites, but the sword of God and Gideon. The force of God and man united makes human efforts succeed; but when this union is broken by our sins, all our endeavours are rendered doubly useless, by depriving us of the aid of God, and of the strength of our own arm. And first, as I shall show, by depriving us of the aid of God. There is an irreligious opinion, not uncommon in the world, that God is always on the side of great armies. God delights in a cause that pleases him, and in subjects that deserve his favour, to give the victory to the smaller number, and to the weaker party, in order to show us that victory belongs to him, and to prevent us from attributing our success to our own arms. I know full well that the success of arms, as of all other designs, depends

greatly on the measures of prudence and the operations of valour; but you will agree with me also, in allowing, that these things, which are the gifts of nature, receive their energy from the will of God; since, in spite of the aid of the longest experience, the most profound reflection, wariest counsels, and the most certain opinions that wisdom can suggest, do we not find that God has the power to spread in a moment over the politician a mist of confusion that shall cause him, in the choice of an hundred different projects, to chuse the worst; a veil of temerity, that shall prompt him to precipitation in the execution of his scheme at an unfavourable moment; an air of stupidity that shall make him insensible to the advantage of the occasion that presents itself, and a habit of carelessness and inattention that shall cause him to lose sight of it, and let it slip through his hands? God can freeze the spirit of the bravest, and arrest the arm that is seizing the standard: God can make the boldest tremble; and there is no precaution to be taken against unforeseen events. To attribute such strokes as these to chance, is the error of human ignorance; there is no chance undirected. We have read till now of the ancient revolutions of Israel, of Assyria, and of Rome, with indifference, without being in the least affected by them; but we have deceived ourselves. The same God still reigns, and upon the same principles, and he will not change them because the people over whom he reigns are changed. Joshua then, we may consider as speaking to us, when, to animate the Israelites against the shock of countless armies,

armies, he told them, "Fear nothing, God is not of their " side, but of ours," as was well replied by one of our own people to him who boasted, that God and the Republic were upon his money. "Ay, Sir, but on different sides." God is not on the side of the republic, nor was he heretofore; Moses spoke to us, when, to dissuade the children of Israel from fighting, he said, "Engage not, you are too few; your enemies are " better armed than you, better entrenched, more inured to " war; God is not with you; you have disobeyed him, you " have drawn down his wrath upon you."

In order to judge of the success of our enterprises, let us look into our present state, and see if God be with us. No doubt we have long enjoyed his blessings in a visible protection, in a general overflowing of every sort of convenience, and every species of indulgence, and an unbroken chain of conquest, and of triumph—through what a series of years from *father to son*, with what a stream of profusion from the river to the ocean. But we have abused the liberality of God by the obstinacy of ingratitude, and the impiety of indevotion, by the insolence of abundance, and the idleness of luxury, by the pride of success, and the contempt of nations. God is gone from us. How could he stay with us, so infatuated with conceit, so surrounded with vices, so beset with enormities? The reproaches and the menaces of the prophets belong to us: it is not enough to lament and murmur, we must struggle hard, and make violent exertions to force

our way through the bars of our prison, by divesting ourselves of every incumbrance that shall prevent our escape from the tyranny of sin, and the thraldom of impenitence. Let us take especial care how we imitate the sottish insensibility of the Jews, who grew blinder by their misfortunes, and saw not the sword that hung over their heads, or the stone that was ready to roll down upon their feet, and leaning ever on false hopes, and imagining vain things, forsook not their misdoings, or put any trust in the sure mercies of the God of Abraham, but made a contract with Death, till Corruption with a bribe in one hand and a scourge in the other, lashed them into obedience. We too are to be likened to the Jews in our prosperity ; our houses were of mud, and we have rebuilt them of brick ; and they are of brick, and we have cased them with marble ; our fields were set with alders, and we have replanted them with the willows of Egypt, and the cedars of Libanus. We too are mounted on swift horses, and swiftly shall we be pursued. Away then with all frivolous projects, all idle plans ; throw yourselves at the foot of the altar of God ; go not to the wizard, or the cunning man, to find out why you cannot triumph on the continent ; and why your enemies pull down one king, and set up another, and dry up with the sole of their feet all the waters of besieged places. Fly ye to the law of God, consult the scriptures, weep and howl for your sins, bewail, and expiate—make atonement, and instantly, for all the world is to be leagued against you ; but let God be for you, and the world shall be dust in the balance. All that

sparkles

sparkles in the eye of hope to undo you, all that pants in the bosom of insatiate desire to annihilate you, to take away your name and your place, to raze you out of the list of nations, and sink you in your native sea, shall not prevail, if God be with you. Let him be the object of your fear. All your efforts are useless when deprived of his assistance; but still more, in losing his aid, the little strength of your own arms will be weakened. In losing him, your own strength will be lost. Which brings me to the second position: That unless we are united with God, we shall lose the strength of our own arm. What, I pray you, are the prevailing vices of the age, the crying sins that fatigue daily the ears of God, and ascend in accusations to the throne of the Almighty Judge? Are we not all affected and eaten through with the canker-worm of avarice and concupiscence, with intemperance in our rage after gold, and madness to acquire pre-eminence and power, at the expense of truth, of good faith, and patient industry? Do we not jump the life to come to be possessed of the ingots of the South, and the precious stones of the East? Do we not sacrifice our characters at the shrine of Mammon, and court perjury, go into voluntary infamy, to come out oppressed with wealth we cannot count, and hoards we dare not distribute? Is there, in general, any purity among us, any truth, any simplicity, any religion which is not lukewarm, any sense of honour, or any use of reason? When we consider the want of all these golden qualities, not only as outrages against God, but as offences against all society; it is evident that the

state that is without them must be in a tottering condition, and its courage, the soul of all hardihood in enterprise, be greatly diminished, whilst on the other hand, by luxury and inordinate extravagance, its means must be exhausted. Would we then retrench at home, and preserve our possessions abroad, we must cut off both these excrescences, and adopt temperance, and cultivate economy. Empires are set up and established by courage and personal bravery, and rescued and defended by the same virtues. Nothing is to be expected from effeminacy and voluptuousness, but baseness and cowardice. "Arise, ye men of war," says the prophet, "put on your armour, take your spear and shield, and run to encounter the enemy who threatens to present himself at your gates." What a glorious resource is it for a people to shake off their sloth, and to turn their very amusements to the defence of their country ! The sin of idleness is the first sin to be repented of in a state, a sin that engenders of itself every other vice. The influx of wealth is essentially necessary to a nation that is to defend itself against a host of enemies ; but this resource is cut off by the next reigning vice that has dominion over us, which is avarice and covetousness, and which nothing but repentance can get the better of. The sordid inclination of covetousness to amass and heap up, is but half the evil of its malice ; it is as fatal to our happiness, when it collects to scatter : the necessities of the state are cheated in both cases, whether the sacrifice be made to the passion of accumulation, or the rage for expense.

The time was when the government was rich and the subject poor ; but now the case is changed, and individuals abound, whilst the state is impoverished ; but how great is the folly of the members of such a country who can flatter themselves that they can keep their wealth, and suffer their country to die of poverty ! and yet this infatuation is not uncommon at the present moment. Let no man say that the peril of a state is in the multitude of its external enemies, but rather that it is vice that extinguishes its spirit, and domineers over its ancient virtue. Who is it that will invade us, whilst brotherly love continues to unite us ? who is it that will separate us, while virtue holds us together ? When corruption shall have so far succeeded as to tear us from one another, then will the enemy appear among us ; but for this, thanks to the Providence that guards our coasts, I trust, we are not ripe. God, who sets his face against every scandalous excess, will ever be an enemy to those who either suffer it, or commit it ; and against such an enemy all resistance must be vain. Let us essay then to avert the wrath of Heaven by prayer, and fasting ; to prayer let us add humility, and to humility, repentance.

The indispensable qualities necessary to induce God to listen to our prayers, are well known to be humility, fervour, and confidence. We ourselves are wont to yield to nothing less when we are solicited ; and God, no doubt, has the same right to refuse the petitions we offer to him, that do not come with these

these recommendations. We may see what these dispositions are in the glass of the people of God. Whenever they perceived the neighbouring infidels coming suddenly upon them, they began to humble themselves before God: they cried with one voice, We have sinned against thee, O Lord, we and our fathers; we have dealt wickedly. See them attacked by the Ethiopians in the reign of Asa, by the Moabites and the Ammonites under Josaphat, by Sennacherib under Hezekiah, by the kings of Syria in book of the Maccabees. As soon as the enemy drew nigh, they ran to Jerusalem to worship; those who could not go thither, turned their faces towards the temples, and lay prostrate on the earth in that direction. They passed days in prayer, and lamentation, and fasting; they put off their gay apparel, to clothe themselves in sackcloth; they rolled in ashes, and sprinkled them on their heads. High and low, rich and poor, prince and people, went sorrowing in pious procession. Pleasures and amusements were laid aside, business was forgot, and nothing thought of but remorse and penitence, pious orgies, and holy affliction.

What a change has time worked! We know little of sackcloth or ashes, we are unacquainted with solemn fasting, except by proclamation. The times are changed; but God waxeth not old: we have the God of Israel for our God, whom we have offended as much as the Jews ever did; and if he require sincere sorrow and inward fasting, abstinence from self-indulgence, compunction,

compunction, and austerity of principle, from those that address him in their prayers, he cannot but be offended, when the lips are moved, but the heart uttereth no groan ; when the voice is heard indeed, but the sinner confesses nothing. How can we be said to put any trust in God, when we fly like our first parent from the presence of our Father, who is calling after us ? How can we be called penitents, when we answer again, and attempt to cover our transgressions with the thin foliage of excuse, and disguise and palliate our shame with the cloak of justification ? We hide ourselves and our faults from him in vain, though we may lie concealed from our own notice in the thickets of the world, and the impenetrable shades, and dark disguise of indifference, or infidelity. When we pray to God with rebellion and impenitence in our hearts, we do but resemble the Pharisee in his sins, without his good works, and without his repentance. Now if God were not pleased with the Pharisee, because he trumpeted his good works ; but with the Publican, because he confessed his faults, how much more must he be offended with the hypocrite who fasts one day with a full intention to feast the next, and him, who cries, Lord, Lord, have mercy upon me a sinner ! when, at the moment he is uttering the ejaculation, he is living, perhaps, and means to die, in his sins. If such a one there be, what should we say to him ? why, what Peter said to Simon, “ Thou hast no part nor lot in this matter, for thy heart “ is not right in the sight of God ; thou art in the gall of bitterness, and the bond of iniquity.”

All those evils, whose pressure grows more intolerable by length of time, are inflicted upon us for the purpose of our final salvation. They are the provocations to repentance, with which God incessantly assails us, in order to break the enchantment of our sins, and awake us from the stupefaction of iniquity. If we indulge a wish to feel no inconvenience from our complaint, we wish most fatally to our existence; for from that moment the mortification is begun, and our case is irremediable. As long as we feel the shootings of pain, so long do we know we are alive to cure, and may be saved; but when all is quiet, we doze through our disease, and have no power to shake off the fatal lethargy.

When this is the state of the case, prayer is useless. God holds an immortal hatred to sin, and an irreconcileable aversion to every thing opposite to his nature; and to punish this single evil, he permits all the rest. We cannot believe in God, and suppose it possible to render him propitious by prayer to our transgressions, that we may continue in them. If this be our wish, let us rather sink under the weight, and invoke him no more: he is God, that he should punish, not, O horrid impiety! that he should compound. How blind is man, who makes such a boast of his reason, that he can see through a consequence, and yet cannot perceive that he converts his faith, upon the ground of which he worships, into an occasion of prayer for continuance in iniquity! But God can discover our self-love through

the veil of our pretended zeal, and will tell us without reserve, You are no people of mine, change your lives and your morals, or you shall be overrun by the fool who cries, “ Tush, there is “ no God,” and trampled under foot by the Sadducee, who says there is no resurrection. If you persist in ingratitude, and are “ obstinately bent upon offending, by profaning my law, and “ neglecting my worship, I who guarded you will become your “ destroyer; I will serve you as I have served in all times the “ unthankful, and the unrepenting.” As the honour of the Lord resides in his temple, and as there we are expected to pay the homage of our fealty, so in this country is the deposit of true Protestantism; but if we defile his holy place, and pay no honour to his service, he will turn the Philistine into a rod to bruise us, and plough furrows on our back, and let in the As-syrian to devour our goods, and harrow up our substance, and there where he shall punish us, shall be his temple, and our liberty the sacrifice, and our lives the expiation.

Let us lose then no time to return to the Lord ; let us put forth all our strength to effect a new conversion and unsophisticated repentance. Let us not laugh to scorn the menaces of the enemy, merely because we are founded upon a rock, but because the arm of God could save us, though we were carried into the midst of the land. God neither hardens his heart, nor dries up his pity, or his sensibility when he afflicts us most, and chastises us with his greatest severity. Repentance and abstinence

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from illicit pleasures, and habitual luxuries, can alone break down the wall that separates us from God and his Christ, and burst asunder the chains that hold us slaves to lordly appetites. God is not deaf to our cries, but we have no ears or eyes for his admonitions : he will not, however, always be patient, who can raise up children from stones and stocks to Abraham.

Let us then confess, and say, Blessed Lord, and Father Almighty, we have lain down in our sins, and though thou hast punished us, we have still offended. Are we not thy creatures ? Hast thou not made us ? Canst thou see our errors, and not remember our origin ? Weak, frail, and inconstant, thou hadst no sooner withdrawn the light of thy countenance from us, but we fell into the pit of impenitence. Look on us again, O Lord ; shine forth—snatch our darling once more from the lions—and take us out of the abyfs of destruction. Although we be unworthy of being called thy children, yet, because we confess that we are unworthy, forgive us.



THE END.

